CHAPTER 4

The European Institutions and Their Communication Deficits

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The European Union is experiencing a moment of profound crisis, one of the many since it was founded. Internally, the rise of populism is calling the pillars of the common project into question; externally, the new fronts that have opened up with the geopolitical and socio-economic crisis of 2008 and the migrant crisis of 2015 are putting the European institutions' ability to cope with the major issues of globalization to the test. After a period flush with such major achievements as the creation of the Eurozone (with its 19 countries and approximately 350 million inhabitants), the Schengen Area and the enlargement to 28 member states, the approval of the Lisbon Treaty (the EU's first Constitution) and the creation of the European Central Bank, the process of integration has begun to show unmistakable signs of strain. Though there can be no doubt that these achievements have made the European project more concrete—fuelling the expectations as well as the criticisms surrounding

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it—repeated onslaughts such as the 2008 financial meltdown, international terrorism and the recent migrant emergencies have probed the limits of what Europe's institutions can take. Most recently, the threats besetting the Union have come to a head with Brexit, throwing the ongoing crisis into even sharper relief.

Democratic Deficit and Political Deficit: A Gap to Be Bridged

Now that internal and external crises are accentuating the differences between Member States rather than reducing them, the differentiation within the EU that has been taken as the narrative of European integration is becoming a limitation. The backdrop here is the democratic deficit[1] from which the European project suffers, and the long-standing difficulty in reducing it (Majone 1998; Moravcsik 2002; Follesdal and Hix 2005). As long as membership of the Union was more symbolic than tangible, the problems did not surface. But when Europe's role in the public and political spheres became more concrete and impacted the Member States' domestic politics and the lives of their citizens in more obvious ways, criticisms and unfavourable views also began to carry greater weight. The years of *permissive consensus* (Brechon et al. 1995) gave way to those of *constraining dissensus* (Hooghe and Marks 2009), which is now hardening into *open conflict*.

The lack of solid institutional narratives addressed to public opinion at such critical moments as the entry into force of the Schengen (1990) and Maastricht (1992) treaties, the introduction of the euro and the enlargement to EU-28 gave free rein to adverse rhetoric in the political discourse (Belluati and Serricchio 2014; Belluati and Caraffini 2015; Belluati 2018). From a certain point onwards, Euroscepticism—or anti-European populism—became powerful political rhetorics but also an element of contentious politics as defined by Tilly and Tarrow (2006).

[1] 'The "democratic deficit" is a term used by people who argue that the EU institutions and their decision-making processes suffer from a lack of democracy and seem inaccessible to the ordinary citizen due to their complexity. The real EU democratic deficit seems to be the absence of European politics. EU voters do not feel that they have an effective way to reject a "government" they do not like, and to change, in some ways, the course of politics and policy'. Source: Euro-Lex (https://eur-lex.europa.eu/homepage.html; last accessed 12 February 2020).

After the Lisbon Treaty became law, the burden of supporting the European Union's new arrangements fell largely to the European institutions, which were unable or unwilling to advance a true political discourse. What emerged was not just a democratic deficit, which would in any case be typical of any constituent phase, but a full-scale political deficit (Schmidt 2006) in negotiating and addressing the integration process in the European public sphere. The result was an erosion of trust in the European Union, at least until 2014. In that year, the trend was reversed, and trust in the EU outstripped trust in national parliaments and governments.[2]

Thus began the debate on what the European public space should in fact be, and what concrete shape a political discourse capable of going beyond the Member States' borders should take. It is a widespread opinion that the creation of a transnational democracy without a European *demos* (Schlesinger 1995, 1999; Bellamy and Castiglione 2003; Habermas 2004, 2011; Sassatelli 2008; Risse 2014) is the main reason that the integration project has stalled (Habermas 2011, 2019). Many intellectuals have viewed the European project as a challenge to modernity and the construction of complex identities (Elster 1991; Melucci 1991), while others have warned of the dangers of forced uniformity and the loss of values.

There is broad agreement that the reason for the integration project's lack of success lies in its democratic deficit, a term first used in 1977, when it appeared in the 'Manifesto of Young European Federalists' by Richard Corbett (2016). According to Gianfranco Pasquino (2018), applying this expression to the European Union is as convincing as it is unclear. In general, it denotes the legitimacy shortfall and inefficiency of the main European institutions, which are accused of not reflecting the wishes of the Member States' voters and being unable to ensure that Europe's citizens can fully hold them to account. Thus, all institutional decisions remain in the hands of the national governments on the one hand and EU technocrats on the other, cutting the voters out of the picture. Consequently, the decision-making procedures are wide open to the concerns of Member State governments and the Eurocrats, but not those of the public. Pasquino (2012) argues that we must determine where exactly this deficit lies. If the European institutions do not respond adequately to the voters because the latter do not have the opportunity to express

[2] Standard Eurobarometer 91, Spring 2019.

their wishes, then the deficit is a question of what has been called *input-legitimation*. Conversely, if the problem is that the institutions act in their own interests and not those of the 'people', then the deficit is one of *output–legitimation*.

When we speak of the democratic deficit, however, what do we mean by the term 'democratic'? The term refers both 'to the electoral procedures whereby political office and power are granted to those who are legitimized to make binding decisions for a community' and to the decision-making processes for the elected office-holders. In addition, it 'should also include the existence of procedures, methods and relationships of accountability—or in other words, the decision-makers' acceptance of their responsibility to the voters who elected them and who are affected by the decisions' consequences—and whether or not voters are in fact able to replace the decision-makers' (Pasquino 2012: 417–419).

Europe's democratic deficit has been expressed in many ways. The intransigent positions that a number of Member States took via the European Council at several crucial moments resulted in certain political strategies that were poorly explained and poorly understood by the public, who thus had an unfiltered view only of the negative consequences. These States' economic policies, for example, aggravated the divisions within the Union, fuelling 'sovereigntist' movements and empowering hostile alliances such as the so-called Visegrád Pact between Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic and Slovakia, which is also being eyed by several Italian and Austrian party groups. The EU's cohesion and redistribution policies have had little impact, while the power disparity between the Union's 'rich' and 'poor' countries has become glaringly apparent, as has the resurgence of 'sovereigntist' pressures. And with Brexit, the culminating moment of the current crisis, the idea of a two-speed Europe has returned with a vengeance to the institutional and intellectual debate[3] on the Union's future (Cavalli and Martinelli 2015).

From the institutional standpoint, one of the features of the democratic deficit is the weakness of the European Parliament, the Union's political arm and its only institution elected by direct universal suffrage. As the EU arose primarily as a problem-solving entity, it has long embraced an intergovernmental working method that thought of the integration process in

[3] Cfr. online article 'Europa a due velocità', https://www.rivistailmulino.it/news/newsitem/index/Item/News:NEWS _ITEM:4268; last accessed 10 February 2020.

terms of achieving a strategic compromise between the Member States, each of which pursued its own interests (Moravcsik 2002). For many years, this meant that the community institutions—regarded as being at the service of the national governments—had little autonomy. Since the late 1980s, the effects of globalization have forced the European institutions to find a new approach to making decisions, based to a large extent on neo-institutionalism (March and Olsen 1992) and cooperation between the Member States. The aim was to promote a principle of social equity that would make it possible to go beyond national interests, but these hopes were soon dashed by the difficulty of curbing the many forms of competition between the Member States and of managing conflict in the EU's institutional space.

Though the Lisbon Treaty increased the power of the European Parliament, which in theory dictates Union policy, its role is still subordinate to that of the European Commission and Council. Decisions regarding a variety of questions are subject to the ordinary legislative procedure, based on what is intended to be an equitable 'institutional triangulation'. Under the ordinary legislative procedure (also called the co-decision procedure), proposals by the Commission must be approved by the European Parliament and ratified by the Council, where voting is almost always unanimous and any Member State can veto the decision. In some matters such as foreign policy and defence, the European institutions are not directly involved because the Member States have not ceded sovereignty. In these cases, decisions on proposals by the Commission are made through an intergovernmental method where the Council plays a fundamental part and the European Parliament acts in an advisory capacity.

The workings of the European parties also contribute to creating a democratic short circuit (Cavalli and Martinelli 2015). The Europarties' power to influence policy-making is very different from that traditionally wielded by their national counterparts (Hix 2002; Caraffini 2015). Taking the operation of Italy's parties as a comparator, it is clear that the Europarties' function is chiefly one of providing links rather than political guidance. The European party families subscribe to several overarching political visions—socialist, popular, liberal, leftist, Christian and green—but internally, each accommodates national political cultures that can differ widely (Ciancio 2007; Levi and Sozzi 2015).

Starting from the left-leaning European parties, we have the Greens/European Free Alliance, where hard-core eco-warriors like the

Portuguese party share political space with other more institutional and government-aligned groups such as those from Northern Europe. The European left has joined forces in the European United Left/Nordic Green Left (GUE/NGL), where Spain's opposition Podemos and Izquierda Unida (IU) have thrown in their lot with Ireland's Sinn Féin and the Greek left-wing coalition SYRIZA. Italy's left-wing Liberi e Uguali (LeU) party would also have been part of the bloc, had it been able to send at least one MEP to the European parliament.

Likewise, the European socialists in the European Parliament—the Progressive Alliance of Socialists and Democrats (S&D)—are also an assemblage of parties with highly dissimilar political orientations. To cite a single example, it is only since 2014 that all of the MEPs from Italy's Partito Democratico (PD)—which was established in 2007—have belonged to the group. Before 2014, only those PD MEPs who had formerly been with the Democratici di Sinistra (DS) were part of the group, while those who had been members of the Partito Popolare Italiano (PPI) caucused with the European People's Party (EPP). The EPP in turn brought together members of very different national parties, such as Angela Merkel's Christlich Demokratische Union (CDU), Silvio Berlusconi's Forza Italia (FI) and Victor Orban's Kereszténydemokrata Néppárt, or Christian Democratic People's Party (KDNP).

The rise of nationalist parties is another example of the atypical operation of Europe's supranational political institutions. The liberal Renew Europe group (RE) is perhaps the most transnational of all, as it is made up of a series of minor national parties that were able to make their political strength felt only on the larger European stage. Had Emma Bonino's +Europa reached the threshold required for representation in the European Parliament, it would also have become part of the RE *Spitzenteam*. Over time, RE's charismatic leader, Guy Verhofstadt, has been able to consolidate a political force which is less constrained by national considerations, though his leadership has recently been challenged by the entry of the French Liste Renaissance movement headed by Emmanuel Macron.

As for the anti-European parties (something of a contradiction in terms in the European Parliament), it cannot be said that there is a united Eurosceptic front. France's Rassemblement National (RN) headed by Marin Le Pen and Italy's Lega Nord (Northern League) under Matteo Salvini are both in the Identity and Democracy group. Italy's Movimento Cinque Stelle (M5s), along with the Basque separatists, are not currently part of a political grouping, whereas in the previous legislature they were

together with the UK's UKIP, which after Brexit is no longer in the European Parliament. Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli d'Italia (FdI) belongs to the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group which also includes many MEPs from Visegrád Pact countries, though they tend to take their cue from Victor Orban (EPP).

This tangle of political affiliations produces variable results at the co-decision stage. It is by no means to be taken for granted that MEPs will toe their European group's line. Analyses of parliamentary voting yield results that are not always unequivocal. The 'matching rates' in votes cast for or against individual measures published by Vote Watch for Europe[4] up to the latest legislature show that how MEPs vote does not always reflect their national party's group membership. For example, the M5s voted together with ALDE, the Greens/EFA and GUE/NGL much more frequently than with its own group.[5]

Seen through the lens of national political cultures, the European political space thus takes on the blurred outlines of a Politics without Polity (Dosenrode 2016), validating the charge that the European public space is too normative. At the same time, beneath the complexity of Europe's political architecture, we can discern a new and more transnational potential, doubtless still highly technocratic, but ready and waiting to express itself. If we look, for example, at the formation of the parliamentary majority in Brussels, we see a distinct shift from the political centre that will have repercussions for future decisions. The grand coalition between the EPP and S&D that kept a tight grip on the majority in the European Parliament until 2014 has been forced to bring other groups on board. The liberal bloc (ALDE, now renamed Renew Europe) has often been the third force in Parliament. However, the recent success of Green parties in many European countries except Italy has opened up new possibilities for forming a majority. Nor should we forget that it is precisely through alliances that do not hinge on ideology that the European Union has been able to take major decisions that have often put it in the forefront in many areas: the environment, health and food safety, human rights, international cooperation and cybersecurity. Viewed from a pro-Union perspective, these are all signs of political and institutional action that

[4] See https://www.votewatch.eu/; last accessed 10 February 2020.

[5] See https://blog.openpolis.it/2017/01/10/con-chi-vota-piu-spesso-il-movimento-cinque-stelle-in-europa/13098; last accessed 10 February 2020.

is anything but static and depoliticized, and whose narrative potential is high. Nevertheless, this potential has not been put to full, effective use by the institutions, and information flows have centred mostly on the issues at stake for the Member States.

The lacklustre outcome of the Union's new constituent phase and the distortions generated by the economic crisis seem to have dragged the European project back to the starting line. If we take a dispassionate view of how institutional resources are managed, it is clear that there is an increasing need for a co-decision method where political mediation is central to dealing with the conflicts between Member States. The crux here is that conflict must be accepted as a 'natural fact' that can never be entirely suppressed in the system of institutional relationships (Adler 1992; Tilly 1984), which also involves NGOs, multinationals, public opinion and collective movements. Not all of the Member States, however, have taken the change in the decision-making model to heart. Those that have—Germany, for instance—have seized the helm of the EU. Others, like the United Kingdom, have refused to stay the course, exiting from the European regulation space. Others again have taken various tacks, often oscillating between these two opposing poles.

At the heart of the democratic deficit that afflicts Europe, then, is the difficulty of elucidating an institutional and political architecture that is anything but clear, and is saddled with a set of far-from-straightforward rules of operation that make it seem remote and difficult to understand. The lack of politicization of the European public sphere weighs heavily on the situation, as does the inability to bring effective messages about ethics and values into the public discourse (Belluati 2012, 2015). Many factors can be blamed. On the one hand, the Member States balk at pushing their own interests into the background and making real efforts to pursue a policy of solidarity; on the other, the European institutional ethos prides itself on striving to be *super partes*, which an increasingly polarized and partisan public arena tends to find alienating.

Though all of these elements can be interpreted in many ways, our intention here is to discuss them from the perspective of communication, which encompasses and regulates them all. In any case, the oft-cited Habermasian notion of the public sphere (Habermas 1990) centres on the effectiveness of communication processes in activating the institutional *demos*. Communication, however, is not only technique and strategy, but is also identity and active engagement (Koopmans and Erbe 2004;

Della Porta and Caiani 2006) in an increasingly interconnected and cross-fertilized communication environment (Bondebjerg and Golding 2004; Bondebjerg and Madsen 2008; Hutter et al. 2016).

The Information Deficit: Perennially Playing Catch-Up

Apart from the problem of the decision-making method, the current phase must get to grips with the fact that, as Vivien Schmidt (2006) argues, the national polities are political orphans, and most Member States end up submitting to decisions without championing the need for them. This inevitably makes it harder to arrive at legitimized decisions. Whereas the de-politicization of Europe's institutional space in the first constituent phase was dictated by caution and by the fear that an overly political approach would lead to political paralysis or even undermine the fragile process of integration, the much-touted impartiality and even handedness is now revealing itself to be a limitation that explains the reasons for the internal crisis. Some scholars have maintained that the fragility of the Union's institutions and the growing dissatisfaction with the European project (and even open hostility towards it) are not so much the result of the absence of a European *demos* or of institutional rationality, as of the lack of political mobilization and discursive access in the public sphere (Koopmans and Erbe 2004). This lack is the main cause of the widening gap and growing estrangement between the place where decisions are made in Europe and the place where these decisions take effect. The much-discussed democratic deficit that separates the discourses produced by the European institutions, and the public, is thus the outcome of the lack of political mobilization at the European level, which has created the paradox of a supranational dimension that acts and interacts concretely with no 'political' vision to support it. Weighing on this is also the lack of mediation by the information system, which in the absence of spectacle surrounding the decision-making process shows little interest in what goes on in Brussels. With no real engagement on the part of the parties or interest groups, European decisions have no capacity to set the agenda unless they become political battlegrounds. The issue of migration is a clear example. Even though the European institutions have been working long and hard on a co-decided policy, the urgency of certain events and the anti-immigration rhetoric make these efforts look entirely unavailing

and irrelevant, while allowing populist and hostile political forces to dominate the scene.[6] The feebleness of European decisions stems precisely from the fact that the impact of institutional interaction has not yet made itself felt at the level of public debate.

Against this backdrop, the structure of Europe's communication in terms of both organization and the production of social meaning is a central strategic resource for building a sense of belonging and identity, and a bureaucratic culture. Despite delays and resistance, the salience of European issues in the public sphere is increasing (de Vreese 2007). The Brussels institutions grasped this fact before grasping the political dimension and have long invested in communication policies to support their actions (D'Ambrosi 2019). This process is the exact opposite of the traditional consensus-building practices deployed in mature democracies, where the communication resource is usually managed by political groups, parties or other stakeholders who, more or less in line with the media system (Hallin and Mancini 2004), construct the narrative space for issues at the national and European levels. The institutions are involved in these flows only afterwards, when decisions are translated into policies (Bobbio and Roncarolo 2016), following a familiar issue-attention cycle (Downs 1972). In Europe, the communication pipeline is turned around, as the institutions themselves handle the public narrative about EU decisions and channel it to the citizenry using their own methods and forms. At best, the political and media spheres tend to receive this narrative with a yawn; at worst, they will subscribe to (or at least not refute) negative counter-narratives. This short circuit acts on the cognitive plane at all levels, dragging Europe, public life and political routines even farther apart. Speaking of the European communication deficit thus requires us to take a closer look at the three streams that flow together to form Europe's public discourse. The first is the process of constructing

[6] The third Dublin Resolution for asylum seekers came into force in 2013 after lengthy negotiations among the Member States. The text approved was of more limited scope than the one proposed by the European Commission. Although it was signed by all member states, in 2015, during the migrant crisis, some signatory countries—Hungary, Poland, Slovenia and the Czech Republic—refused to apply it. Although it was in Italy's interest to push the European Council to have the resolution enforced, the former deputy Prime Minister, Matteo Salvini, of the Lega (League), aligned himself with these countries. Political populist positions in many states have dominated the institutional agenda.

European identity, the second concerns the workings of the Union's institutions, and the third relates to the information dimension that regulates the European space (Belluati and Marini 2019).

We can start with the question of identity, as it is a delicate and controversial issue but one that is crucial if the difficulties of designing a European *demos* are to be overcome. There can be little doubt that the process of recognizing a European identity entails a series of interdependent steps, each of which contributes in its own way to outlining a space for communicating identity. The early dream of a common European culture soon proved all too illusory, as the European space is made up of an array of cultural, religious, geographical and political diversities that it would be difficult, and undesirable, to reduce to uniformity (Norris 1997). So far, the political identity associated with European citizenship has chiefly been based on technocratic rules (free circulation and free trade) and on the sum of loosely integrated national identities (Thiesse 1999). One factor concerns the definition and development of a European historical memory, in which the Member States' investment has always been minimal (Lee and Thomas 2012). Apart from the rhetoric of Europe as the guarantor of the longest period of peace, few other narratives have arisen over time. The first moments of a European collective memory were the fall of the Berlin Wall, the introduction of the euro and, paradoxically, the financial crisis and the subsequent austerity policies. What Europe's cultural identity lacks is a European cultural heritage, or in other words, that symbolic fabric whose warp and weft are woven together into a common space. There are those who maintain that this is an overly essentialist view which fails to give European countries' cultural heterogeneity its due (Meinhof and Triandafyllidou 2006; Sassatelli 2008). Others acknowledge that the policy of promoting European culture is working, celebrating Europe's multiculturalism and the post-modern idea that different identities can coexist (Verderame 2018). Europe's cultural policies[7] have long subsidized the construction of symbolic transnational and identity resources through cooperation and exchange programmes, as well exemplified by Erasmus Plus. More recently, investments in infrastructures and in efforts

[7] The largest investment is in the EACEA (Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency), which manages funding for education, culture, audiovisuals, sport, citizenship and volunteering. See https://ec.europa.eu/info/departments/education-audiovisual-and-culture_en.

to overcome the digital divide have been trying to create transnational architectures, though they have met with resistance in individual Member States (Cronin 2002; Dunkerley et al. 2002). Language is another factor in cultural integration. Dieter Grimm (1995) and Philip Schlesinger (1995) have drawn attention to the pragmatic obstacles thrown up by the lack of a common language and shared communication systems. One side of the debate holds that without these prerequisites, creating a communicative rationality that can work towards building European citizenship is inconceivable. It is widely believed, however, that this is a non-problem: European identity should spring from the interaction of different messages, rather than standardizing forms and codes of communication. The culturalist vision maintains that language is not just a system of grammatical rules, but is a social practice that produces identity. At present, 24 languages are spoken in Europe, and official documents are translated into all of them—but the cost of this to the Union is not even particularly daunting. As several scholars have emphasized, multilingualism is a cultural asset (Gazzola 2006) because it encourages differentiation and the creation of multiple identities (Melucci 1991), but also calls for investing in mediation practices.

An identity policy must also be based on an architecture and a governance that are equally solid. Mention has already been made of the fact that there is no integrated European media system, and the attempts that have been made so far at the institutional level, like *Euronews*—the European news network—or *EuTube*—the European Commission's YouTube channel—and the official accounts on social media are fairly marginal and have little impact on the public debate (Cornia 2010). For many years, the Commission's DG Comm in particular has fielded a permanent communication organization and policies.[8] The DG has its own budget and has had a number of directives approved over the years that effectively express the

[8] In 1995, the Santer Commission's PRINCE programme laid down the first guidelines for orienting and organizing the Union's communication flows. These were the first steps along a route that over the years would create information centres throughout the EU. The programme was followed in 2001 by the Prodi Commission's White Paper on European Governance, which significantly reinforced the communication strategy pursued by Brussels. Since the early 2000s, there has been a succession of other European policy measures regarding the forms and instruments of communication, including the 2006 Green Paper on Transparency that sought to intervene in the process of digitization and move towards open government strategies in public administrations. Most recently, directives for fighting fake news and misinformation have been approved.

goals and functions of Europe's institutional and public communication. In the last decade, the European Parliament—whose public functions are more recent—has filled a communication gap by establishing its own DG Comm, whose structure and investments have continued to grow. The great anomaly of European communication is that institutional efforts are making up for the de-politicization of Europe's public sphere. This is especially apparent during elections, when the national and European parties have done almost nothing to win public support for their candidates' European platforms. This attitude towards Europe on the part of national politics has spurred the Union's institutions to assume control of the electoral narrative, with all the limitations that this entails, and to take charge of most of the political communication circulating during campaigns. The 10% increase in voter turnout during the 2019 European elections was interpreted as being chiefly the result of the European Parliament's all-out efforts at mobilization through the 'This Time I'm Voting' campaign.[9] This was very much a departure for the European communication system, but a necessary one, as it vested the institution with a role which, on a democratic stage, would have been filled by other political actors. Some contributions to Europe's institutional communication are also made by the European Council, the highest level of intergovernmental cooperation between the Member States, and an effectively political body as it is the forum where the national sovereignties deal with complex or delicate issues that cannot be resolved elsewhere. This institution's communicative function is inversely proportionate to its role, which has become increasingly central over the years, often acting to block decisions made by the other European institutions.

Another aspect that is crucial in outlining the European public sphere is the capacity to frame discourse. The European institutions are accused of being over-complicated and far removed from everyday life. Politically, they seem to have gone AWOL. But there is another rightful participant in the production of Europe's social content: the media (Belluati and Marini 2019). For years, studies have blamed the information deficit on the traditional media outlets, as being ineffective at orienting public discourse towards European concerns (Grossi 1996; Marletti and Mouchon 2005). Institutional journalism has shown little desire or ability

[9] https://www.thistimeimvoting.eu/.

to shift away from its self-referential focus on national parties and political figures. There is a unanimous conviction that mainstream journalism neither frames European issues appropriately nor covers them in sufficient depth. There is an ambivalence in this debate that is not easy to resolve (Koopmans and Statham 2010). On the one hand, it is clear that quality journalism finds it increasing difficult to cover the European Union's institutional activities. On the other, the growing internationalization of information and the new identity bestowed on it by the new channels of communication have called journalism in general—and European journalism in particular—more openly into question (Kriesi et al. 2008; Koopmans and Statham 2010; Risse 2010; Marini 2014). New technologies and sources of information are bringing about profound changes in how information produces social meaning. There is a tension between being deeply embedded in constant, global information flows and the need to re-localize experience (Meyrowitz 1985). This tension is clear in the European information flow, which is changing significantly as a result of new communicative opportunities that are more independent and disintermediated than the traditional journalistic approach. This explains why the once-familiar Brussels correspondents are disappearing and the bubble they worked in has burst, but it also explains the presence of new sources and players in the European information space. Never before have the flows of European news been so intense and salient. New organizations and professional skills are taking shape that, niche though they may be, are redefining what makes European information newsworthy. At the same time, they are changing the frameworks of meaning that a given news flow produces. Though the effect is still limited, and complements rather than replaces existing communication systems, some reverberations at the level of public narrative are beginning to make themselves felt.

Conclusions

While the question of Europe's democratic deficit is deeply entwined with the theme of communication, it cannot be considered apart from the political deficit. This chapter has attempted to draw attention to the fact that the gulf between Europe's institutions and its citizens will not be bridged on its own, but calls for an effort to reinstate Europe's symbolic and cognitive dimension. Unaware as many public players may seem to be, the impact and interdependence of European decisions are

processes that cannot be reversed except with much pain and turmoil, as the British experience will show. Though Community choices have a significant influence on public decisions and everyday life, this is something that national political circles and the more traditional channels of communication fail to realize, and thus do not problematize with sufficient attention. But the European public sphere is more crowded than is generally thought, and new home-grown intermediate bodies are appearing. In the third sector, there are increasing numbers of transnational actors such as consumer movements, environmental movements and NGOs. Moreover, new information sources have arisen in the European space (Politico.eu, for example) and are becoming influential in steering the public debate and raising it to another level. Nor should we underestimate the role of the European institutions, the only actors on this scene who are stretching the limits of their functions to help a Europeanized vision of public discourse gain ground. If a true European public sphere is to come about, every mechanism must mesh together to ensure that this is not the 'last chance' (Habermas 2019) for Europe's 'unfinished adventure' (Bauman 2006).

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